

*Whether the Light of Nature be sufficient to
Salvation :*

CONSIDERED IN A
DISCOURSE
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A DISCOURSE, &c.

I. CORINTH. I. 21.

For after that in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God, by the foolishness of preaching, to save them that believe.

THE occasion of these words seems to be this: the learned among the Gentiles (to whom the Apostle's discourse here refers) entertained very lofty notions of the excellency of their philosophy; it was the only corrector, they thought, of vice and ignorance, and the only conductor to truth and virtue; they admired the strength of its reasonings, its eloquence of expression, and, in short, looked upon it as the only true means of enlightening and reforming the world. Upon these accounts, they gave it the name of *wisdom*.

On the other hand, the reformation of the world, through means of the christian religion, was received by them with scorn and contempt; the pride of learning had so possessed them, that they would not sub-

mit to a method of reformation, which did not spring from philosophical researches, nor which was supported by evidence that refused to be tried by the subtilities of their schools.

In these words, then, the Apostle replies to the objections of the Gentiles, in their own terms :

“ After that in the *wisdom*, or mysterious
 “ councils of the divine will, the proud
 “ Gentiles were not able, by their philosophy alone, to restore the darkened world
 “ to the true knowledge of God, the best
 “ foundation of moral improvement ; it
 “ pleased God, by the preaching of that
 “ religion, which they, in their pride,
 “ called folly, to offer the means of recovery to as many as are willing to embrace them.”

We find this same Apostle withal, in his epistle to the Romans, ii. 14. in plain terms declaring, “ that when the Gentiles
 “ who have not the law (or revelation),
 “ do by nature the things contained in the
 “ law, these having not the law are a law
 “ unto themselves.” From these two texts, therefore, compared with each other, a question arises,

Whether the light of nature be sufficient to salvation ?

On one side of this question, some have maintained, that it would be inconsistent
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with the character of the Deity, as a wise, powerful and good creator, to bring into existence any class of beings, with desires and powers capable of certain enjoyments, and yet not furnished with natural abilities equal to the pursuit and attainment of them; that, therefore, in man, the light of nature comprehends every thing that is fit for him to know and do in every instance, and no revelation can make his duty clearer than it is already to his reason.

On the other side of this question, some professed christians selfishly confining the divine favour themselves, have uncharitably pronounced a decree of reprobation on all who enjoy not the benefit of revelation. But, I apprehend, the greater part of christians believe, that though men, by the light of nature, may be capable of attaining to considerable degrees of happiness: yet, considering the case as a matter of fact, and as it really has been, with respect to the degeneracy of mankind, a revelation was necessary in order to their salvation; and to support this opinion, shall be my business in the remaining part of this discourse.

The word *salvation*, a relative term, alludes, in this case, to man's deliverance from certain evils of error and immoralities, and their natural and penal consequences.

quences. And as revelation offers its aid to effect this salvation, its precepts and motives are calculated, not only to prevent his relapse, but to assist him in the growth of knowledge and continued improvement, until he arrives at the ultimate end of his creation, that celestial bliss in a future world, of which he may be capable, when refined by the virtues of this state of probation. Now, I presume, it will appear that the light of nature is insufficient to this recovery and consequent improvement : for, as to the first, though it is true that “ *when* the Gentiles, who “ have not the law, do, by nature, the “ things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves ;” yet, this word “ *when*” bears a great stress among the words of this text : for, if it be true that men in general have not done, by nature, the things contained in the law ; if it be true that darkness and corruption have dimmed the eye of reason, that gross immoralities universally prevailing and long continued in, have erased the love of virtue and the sense of duty ; does not an external revelation then appear necessary to restore nature to its primitive light, when obscured and defaced by ignorance, corruption, and prejudice ? Or, will it be said that a man who has failed in a certain task, when his
strength

strength was entire, will be equal to a greater, when his powers are decayed? That he, in whose breast the candle of the Lord is almost extinguished, whose conscience is seared and callous, and with whom the glow of virtuous shame has been long since frozen, may, after all, extricate himself by the mere exertions of his own enfeebled principles?

Again, the light of nature will be found insufficient also for moral improvement: for, though we should even admit that its light has not been darkened, yet, an external revelation may be of great use to help us to the knowledge of many important articles which we never could have known without it. Thus, notwithstanding our rational powers have a natural capacity for discerning truth, yet it is certain we stand in need of many helps and assistances to guide us in our discoveries, and that unless we were trained to enquiry, many important truths might for ever lie unknown to us. If, then, we experience the insufficiency of nature in one case, why not admit it in others? There are many things not absolutely beyond the reach of reason, which, yet, not one in ten thousand would ever discover without the help of particular instructions. The opposition in this question, then, is not between reason and revelation,

velation, as if the one was inconsistent with the other, but between reason, under the conduct of revelation, and reason without that aid.

Now, when it is said that the light of nature is sufficient to salvation, it must be an affirmation either of fact or probability: it must say, either that the light of nature has been actually productive of reformation and moral improvement, or else, that it probably would have answered these ends, had it been duly applied.

As to the fact, if we examine what knowledge men actually had before revelation directed them, we shall find that in general it has been very defective. No doubt there were a few extraordinary philosophers; Socrates, Plato, Antoninus, and some others, remarkable teachers of morality; yet they were ignorant of some doctrines absolutely necessary for the reformation of mankind. In general, having no knowledge of the whole scheme and state of things, the manner of the divine interposition necessary to man's recovery, and the glorious end to which God intended finally to conduct him; their whole attempt to discover the truth of things and to direct others, was but like the hopeless struggle of a man wandering in a desert, without knowing the way, or having any true guide to conduct him.

him. Add to this too, that the moral conduct of the most of them, was little better than that of the vulgar. " Who " is there of all the philosophers, (says " Cicero) who made his own philosophy " the rule of his life, and not a mere " shew of his wit and parts? who ob- " served his own instructions, and lived " in obedience to his own precepts?" Notwithstanding all the learning of Greece and Italy, it is certain, the instructions of their best philosophers had but very inconsiderable effects, comparatively speaking. They were never able to reform the world with any great or general success. With respect to the worship of God, idolatry prevailed over all nations; they became vain in their imaginations, and they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into images of the vilest creatures. It is a circumstance too, worthy of our notice, that even amidst their ignorance of deity, they seem to have acknowledged the necessity of supernatural aid. Thus, we find, their best law-givers thought it not a sufficient recommendation of their laws, that they were agreeable to the light of nature and the dictates of reason, unless they were believed also to come down from Heaven; thus Numa Pompilius amongst the Romans, and Lycurgus amongst the Grecians.

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But if by the sufficiency of nature's light be meant, not that knowledge men actually had, but what they might and probably would have had by a careful use of their own powers ; yet, will not this prove that a revelation was useless for the reformation of men, or their improvement in knowledge before they were darkened. For, as we already observed, there are many things not above the reach of our reason, when placed in a certain point of view, which yet the bulk of mankind would never have known without particular instruction. We may instance this, even in that great fundamental principle of religion, the being and attributes of God. Now, though one should think that this lay plainly in the way of our reason, as day after day uttereth speech, and night after night teacheth knowledge of him ; yet, when we consider how apt we are to rest satisfied with the regular appearances of the course of nature, without considering whence they proceed, we must acknowledge the insufficiency of unassisted man for this purpose ; at least, the bulk of mankind. It is a thousand chances to one, that a shepherd tending his flocks upon a mountain would ever begin to search out for the undeniable proofs of this article ; or, though the face of nature around him, might by times lead him
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to imagine there must have been a Creator, it were as many chances to one, that he could ever reduce his thoughts to such a connexion, as to be a convincing proof to his own mind, much less to the minds of others. And supposing that a small degree of learning would enable a man to reason out this point, how few, comparatively speaking, have the benefit of learning? Or, supposing farther, that a number of able philosophers should collect and spread abroad a set of arguments to this purpose, how many would they find that could see the strength of their conclusions? The mathematician may prove his proposition by a chain of demonstration; yet, how many will he find that can see the connexion of his reasoning? and what a number of ages must be elapsed before he can make it universally intelligible to the illiterate world? Now, it is not only probable that this would have been the case with respect to the knowledge of this important article, but we find that it actually was so even among the philosophers themselves. This Cicero testifies: when speaking of the nature of the Gods, he says, “ the philosophers
 “ found the being and attributes of God
 “ a difficult matter to find out, and much
 “ more difficult to explain; it was much
 “ easier for them to say what God was not,
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“ than what he was.” Hence, among the learned Athenians, an altar dedicated to the *unknown God*. If this would have been the case, then, with respect to the plainest principle of religion, we may safely conclude as much of others less obvious. Thus, the worship of idols testified their ignorance about the unity of God; and their many superstitions and different sacrifices, plainly shewed they knew little about atonement: for, now that revelation has explained to us the nature of God’s moral government, we clearly see that no sacrifice can farther atone, than as it promotes the moral improvement of the subjects for whom it is offered. It may be also observed, that the doctrines of the resurrection of the body, the immortality of the soul, and a future state of rewards and punishment (the most powerful motives to reformation) though, strictly speaking, not all peculiar to revelation, yet receive their clearest and most conclusive evidence from that great discovery of the will of God. The plain declarations of a messenger from God, supported in his mission by marks of authenticity, which his enemies confessed no being could furnish, except the Lord of Nature, and rendered still more credible by his own resurrection and ascension, afford more convincing and satisfactory evidence, than

than ten thousand arguments of the ablest philosophers, however fairly drawn, upon presumptive principles, from the nature of the human soul, and the attributes of God.

Upon the whole, then, in whatever view we consider the sufficiency of the light of nature, whether for man's recovery or continued improvement; whether as a matter of fact or probability; we shall be led to acknowledge the necessity of revelation in order to his salvation, from the consequences of his degeneracy, and the refinement of his nature to its greatest perfection. Will it be acknowledged, that God *has* revealed his will to men, and shall it be said that this was not necessary? No one will venture to assert this, when he considers, that he charges the Father of lights with folly, and calls in question his infinite wisdom.

But here it is objected: Is it possible that a revelation should be admitted to be necessary, and yet be kept from the knowledge of mankind for four thousand years? Had it been given to Adam at the creation, it might have been of use to all his posterity. Now, this objection supposes it necessary, that if God designed to grant a revelation of useful truths to mankind, he should have begun by communicating it to Adam.

But can we pretend to be competent judges of the times and seasons most fit and proper for God to grant his dispensations in? Shall we complain of God's moral government, who are so short-sighted with respect to the necessities of men, in the various periods of time? May not many precepts be necessary in one stage of a creature's existence which are not so in another? This is quite agreeable to what we may observe in the world around us. Thus we see the various means to be used by the husbandman at different seasons, in bringing his crops to perfection. Thus, the powers of the human mind, as they are gradually unfolded through the rising stages of youth to the full bloom of manhood, become more and more capable of refined erudition: thus too, the beams of revelation itself, from its first dawn, brightened more and more, as the eye of man could bear its light. It is, therefore, never in our power to judge of the fitness of the times in which God should grant his dispensations, unless we are perfectly well acquainted with the circumstances of the persons to whom they are granted. But were we even to form a probable conjecture in this matter, we would perhaps see an unfitness of time, upon supposition that a standing revelation had been given to Adam. For,
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if we may reason from what actually did happen in the first ages of the world, such revelation must have depended on oral tradition ; and, of course, be liable to all the additions, alterations and corruptions with which that method of conveyance is justly chargeable.

But, suppose the memory of man aided by writing, any one language grown almost universal, any one nation, by any preparatory, providential means, open avowers of the unity of God, and many of its people dispersed over the world ; should not this seem the time, these the circumstances, in which revelation should be brought to its full splendor ?

But again it is objected : There are many nations in the world, who have never had any knowledge of revelation, and consequently, there never was any real need of it ; for, under a righteous governor, that cannot be needful for any, which is not equally made known to all. Now, by the same argument, it would follow, that the light of nature was not necessary ; for, though all the truths of natural religion are certainly discoverable by the right use of reason ; yet it is evident all men have not equal capacities, nor the same means of making that discovery ; and consequently, the knowledge of natural religion being
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far from equal in all men, it would follow, that there was no great need even for that. But, with regard to both the above objections, the truth would appear to be this; that as God was not obliged to make all his creatures equal, to make men angels, or to give all men equal capacities, so neither was he bound to make all men capable of the same degree of happiness, or to afford them the same means, in the same degree, and at the same time, for attaining it.

The power, wisdom, and goodness of God appear great beyond imagination, in filling boundless space with an endless variety of beings of various capacities, yet differing by a gradation to us almost imperceptible, from the most exalted individual of the highest genus to the meanest of the lowest species. This order, we see, takes place in the lower world, and analogy will teach us the same with regard to man and superior beings. Thus an immense foundation is laid for universal happiness, the end of all creation.

The equity of divine government, then, with regard to us, will fully appear, if we have reason to believe that God is not a respecter of persons; that he is not a severe master, expecting to reap where he has not sown; but, that every man will find his happiness amongst the many mansions

sions of the celestial world, in proportion to the improvement of his capacity and means, whatever these may have been.

It rather becomes us, then, to lift up our souls to God in gratitude and praise for the addition his mercy has made to our store, than to make blasphemous remarks upon the narrowness of his dispensations. Shall the thing formed say to him that hath formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Shall the brutes complain that they were not made rational? Shall a Hottentot say, I should have been a Newton? Or an heathen ask his Maker, why am I not a christian? Let the christian be accountable for the talents entrusted to him, and the heathen for his; but let neither complain of the bountiful hand that gave them.

Should not the consideration, then, of *our* need of revelation humble our opinions of our own abilities? Instead of being filled with vain conceits of natural self-sufficiency, should not our hearts be filled with gratitude to him who has blessed us with the means of salvation?--- And since the light of nature itself has been darkened in the first ages of the world, through the corrupt inclinations and ill-governed appetites of men; should we not stand fast in that liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, that the like
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causes may not concur to darken the light of the gospel in us, which darkened the light of nature in earlier ages ?

When I consider the poor and helpless condition of our idolatrous forefathers, who met together to worship the creatures instead of the Creator ; to bow the knee before stocks, and stones, and graven images ; and again, when I cast my eyes around on this venerable audience, and consider you, my reverend fathers and brethren, as stewards in the household of God, ministers in the church of Christ ; and that your particular employment is to apply the light of the gospel to the minds of the ignorant, to guide the steps of the benighted wanderer, to aid the opening powers of the understanding by the lessons of that great Teacher who came from God, and thus to lead thousands of your brethren to knowledge, virtue, true happiness and eternal life ;---I cannot help calling on you to join with me “ in giving thanks unto the Father, who hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light ; who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear son.” I cannot but feel myself called on to join in the grateful exclamation of the apostle, “ O the height, the depth, the length and
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“ the breadth of the love of God through
 “ Jesus Christ, which passeth knowledge.”

If it should be asked, What is the particular duty of those who are called on to distribute the glad tidings of salvation? I will beg leave to say, that it appears to me to consist in these three things: to be diligent and unbiaſſed in acquiring knowledge; impartial and unawed by men in the communication of it; and to make their light ſo ſhine before men, that others ſeeing their good works may glorify their Father who is in Heaven.

In the acquiſition of knowledge, there will no doubt be difference in the degrees of attainment, in proportion to the difference of men's natural capacities and opportunities; but ſtill, whatever a man gains as the fruit of his own fair induſtry in peruſing the ſcriptures, in which are the words of eternal life, will be valuable and laſting. The ſmalleſt ſpark thus gained, will by degrees warm the ſoul and kindle a devotion that will reach to Heaven; whiſt the borrowed flame of the implicit believer is extinguished by every accident. He that cannot draw ſaving knowledge from the fountain of life ſtands but a bad chance at the muddy ſtreams of human compoſition.

As every revelation that comes from God muſt be ſuppoſed to be conſiſtent
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with divine perfections ; and to be the means of improving, and not of contradicting the principles of nature ; wherever the figurative stile of scripture presents to the eye any thing apparently harsh or inconsistent, let us have recourse to the perfections of the Deity, the unalterable law of God written on our hearts, and the indisputable language of Christ and his Apostles, as the best line of solving the difficulty. If this will not bring the whole into harmony before us, it is safer candidly to acknowledge our own ignorance, than to venture to borrow opinions from men, that can neither serve to the glory of God, nor to brighten his image in the human soul. In conveying instructions to others, the candid Teacher will have the same respect to personal persuasion, that he had when informing his own understanding. He will not therefore depart from the fountain of living water, and hew out for them broken cisterns that can hold no water. No. By training men up implicitly to the opinions of others, an artificial fence is thrown about the understanding, a bar against farther improvement. Received opinions are rested in and relied on, the spirit of enquiry sleeps within, familiarity creates a liking, prejudice speaks for its old acquaintance, and rather than give it up, the

the word of God is often misconstrued to silence the voice which sometimes speaks within. Now, which of the two may we suppose most acceptable in the sight of God, or likely to bring forth the best fruits in life? The man, who, after candid and rational enquiry, may yet lie under some errors of judgment, or he who indolently turns his own light into darkness, and has nothing to conduct him but a borrowed gleam? Besides, by teaching for doctrines the commandments of men, a line of division is struck among christians, a stumbling stone thrown in the way of some, the seeds of party-spirit and sedition sown in the minds of others, the growth of religious knowledge retarded, and the spirit of brotherly love, that will mark the real disciples of Jesus, when subdivisions in his church shall be known no more, is buried in oblivion. Whether such have been the effects of human authority in matters of faith, the history of the Christian church will tell. Instead of guarding against error and false principle, there cannot be, I apprehend, a more successful mode of mixing darkness with light. Hence, since the opinions of men have been admitted in matters of faith, the spurious fruits of human invention have gradually crept into the Christian

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church,

church, under the borrowed mask of divine original.

As to hopes or fears of returns from men, the faithful teacher will behold them as less than nothing, when compared with his integrity. He will not withhold one ray of light, nor leave untold an important truth, through fear of hurting his temporal interest, by speaking things opposite to preconceived opinions. He will not prostitute the name of a virtue to cover his cunning, but will look up to God, the searcher of hearts, and freely confess before men, what he conceives to be the truths of the gospel of Christ, in firm hope that he will acknowledge him as a faithful servant, when he shall stand before his Father in Heaven.

As to the third, and last characteristic of the christian teacher, if the light of revelation be intended to guide the steps of men in the paths of virtue, he will consider it as doubly incumbent on him to draw the attention of others, by a conversation exemplary for self-government, charity and piety. He whose profession and office call upon him to reclaim others from the error of their ways, and to assist them in the great work of being purified from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, should present to their observation the pattern of temperance he would wish them to imitate.

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If his own corrupt affections are set on earthly things, with what front can he recommend heavenly affections to others? Will not even the pure words of inspiration, in some measure, lose their weight, by passing from his unhallowed lips, and grate upon the ears of his disgusted hearers? If disorder and impurity prevail within, will not the reproaches of conscience mark his distorted features, and prove to every observer that his words and feelings are widely at variance? But if, unhappily, he is so far lost to self-dominion, that his ungoverned desires break forth into acts of sensuality and intemperance, it is hoping against hope to expect he will cure others. A man of this character makes but a despicable figure amongst men, worse still among christians, but worst of all among the ministers of Christ. With what hopes of success can he exhort his hearers to self-denial, whilst he himself is a slave to his appetites? In spite of his warmest advices his sensual life will seal up the ears of his people, bring disgrace upon his profession, and obstruct the glory of God and the good of souls.

But it would be well if he were only useless: his corrupt example proves ruinous to others, a stone of stumbling is cast before the unwary, an apology for vice is given

given to the half-lost sinner, and the odium is removed to the shamefaced beginner. Thus, instead of leading the flock to the river of life, the treacherous guide goes down before them to the valley of death, and invites them to drink deep of its poisonous streams.

Again, if Christ's doctrine and example were designed to unite men of the most distant parties, tempers and interest, in the bonds of love; if gentleness, love and beneficence adorned his whole conversation; if he has declared, that without brotherly love, the christian name is nothing; and if he at last, out of love to men, laid down his life to seal and secure the truth of his religion, and confirm to them the possession of his gospel, as a light to their feet and a lamp to their paths, and that the whole family of God might come at last to rejoice together; is it not absolutely incumbent on all his professed apostles, diligently to apply to themselves whatever means may contribute to such an important end, and prove to the world that they are Christ's disciples, by loving one another as he has loved them? By this, they will cause their light to shine before men with salutary rays, they will render themselves ornamental to the Christian church, the character of love will be deeply engraven on their own hearts, and
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will distinguish them as worthy servants in their Master's house, when all difference in opinion, forms of worship, and the names that subdivide the church upon earth, shall be remembered no more.

Lastly, it is the professed business of the christian teacher, to train up men in the exercise of piety, and to kindle a flame of devotion in the breasts of others; and is it possible he can do this, if a stranger to it himself? He that discourses about the character of the Deity, the beauty of holiness, and the hopes of Heaven; and at the same time feels little of what he says, will hardly excite those emotions in other men's breasts, that he never felt in his own. Whereas he that is holy and devoted to God, speaks the language of his own heart, and will most likely reach the hearts of others. There is a sympathetic enthusiasm in true devotion, that communicates the spark from the real devotee, and warms the breast of the languid worshipper.

To conclude, then, my Reverend Fathers and Brethren, let us, who, in the appointment of the providence of God, are employed in the important trust of distributing his word, resolve that we will never be prevailed on by any temptation to handle it deceitfully; that we will never attempt to lord it over God's heritage,
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but endeavour to be helpers of their joy ; and that we will be exemplary to believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith and in purity. Let us keep our thoughts fixed on that impartial judgment to which we must at last be subjected, in the presence of one from whose face the earth and the heaven will fly away. Let us often think on the number and value of the talents entrusted to our care, and endeavour so to improve them to the good of our own souls and the salvation of others, that we may have good ground to hope we shall stand with uplifted faces before the son of man, and receive that gladdening sentence, “ Well done, good and faithful servants, enter ye into the joys of your Lord.”

THE END.